**Rome’s Rich Past Stalls Metro Line Expansion**

*ABC news, By Ann Wise, Oct. 22nd, 2009*

For years now, the frustrated citizens of modern [Rome](http://abcnews.go.com/Travel/48-hours-rome/story?id=8821240) have struggled with clogged traffic as they await the construction of a new subway line through the heart of the city, the Metro C.

But instead of futuristic tunneling and construction, all they have seen since 2006 are shifting archaeological excavations, cordoned off with "Metro C-Archeological Investigation" banners that pop up monthly in different areas of the city.

Scientists excavate in the hopes of finding, well, nothing -- or at least nothing of importance. Only then can the Metro move forward. Rome sits on layers and layers of history, the earliest dating back to the Stone Age. Archaeology has always been the nemesis of modern public works.

Rome has only two other existing [Metro lines](http://abcnews.go.com/International/Video/videoLogin?id=2579533). The Metro B was built in 1955. The Metro A opened in 1980 but took some 20 years to build, the delays caused by archaeology.

The new Metro C line will run east to west through the very heart of what used to be ancient Rome, and while the actual tunnels for the Metro are not a problem -- they will be dug 100 feet down, well beneath any archaeological treasures -- the stations, exits and air ducts present major problems in many locations. Archeologists are trying to pinpoint the areas on downtown thoroughfares and squares where the least damage will be done.

One of the originally planned stops in downtown Rome on Largo Argentina, the heart of ancient Republican Rome, had to be scratched completely. Archaeological excavations have been under way for more than a year in another important square in the center of Rome, the large and traffic-crazed Piazza Venezia, where a major Metro station must go. In ancient times, it was part of the Roman Forum.

"The station at Piazza Venezia must be built," Rome archaeological superintendent Angelo Bottini told the Italian newspaper La Repubblica last year, "but we need to work out where the clash between the line and antiquity will cause the least damage.” The digging of an open-air pit -- 75 feet in diameter -- at the center of Piazza Venezia for the main part of the subway station has been OK'd by archaeologists, even though it will cause the "total elimination of any pre-existing archaeological evidence," said Bottini in a report. It must be painful for an archaeologist, he said, but it is necessary for progress.

A case in point: When they excavated other areas of the piazza looking for relatively "sterile" areas, archaeologically speaking, where subway exits could be built, they came across what is considered the most important metro-related discovery yet.

**Hadrian Gets in the Way**

As they dug through down through layers of modern, Renaissance and Medieval remains to the level of ancient Rome, they found what looked like a grand stairway made with sheets of granite and [antique](http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=8764324) yellow marble. Across the way, the remains of a matching stairway -- the steps long, shallow and deep -- led archaeologists to the conclusion that they were looking at the seats of a covered rectangular amphitheater, a place where plays, speeches and debates were held by the city's poets, scholars and politicians.

Archaeologist Roberto Egidi, who directed the excavation, said research in texts by ancient sources suggests they have found the Emperor Hadrian's "Athenaeum" -- an auditorium ancient writers say he built at his own expense on his return from Palestine around A.D. 135.

So the Metro entrance had to be moved. It is now being planned a few yards away where all they have found is a Roman sewage system and some Roman tabernae or shops -- finds that in any other city except Rome would spark quite some excitement.

A number of other entrances are planned around the square but digging at those locations has yet to begin. page

**Roman History Slows Roman Progress**

The Atheneum is considered the biggest find yet, but the lesser discoveries in the course of Metro work are equally interesting. In 2006, archaeologists digging on the edge of central Rome discovered that the Aurelian Walls, built by the emperor Aurelius [in A.D. 271](http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory?id=8762743) to protect the city, were twice as high as originally thought.

A series of rural settlements dating in layers from the Stone Age through Roman times were found on the outskirts of Rome where a future Metro parking lot is planned, and a number of interesting finds emerged in the area along today's Corso Vittorio Emanuele. These include the Greek gymnasium that the Emperor Nero had built near his baths, and a Roman canal that drained this marshy area of the city.

While [archaeologists fear destruction](http://abcnews.go.com/Travel/wireStory?id=8775676) because of the Metro, they also acknowledge that the project has provided funding for their work, and the opportunity to excavate areas where they wouldn't normally have thought to look.

Roberto Cecchi, special commissioner for the Rome Metro, says that not even Romans realize how rich the ground under their feet is.” They don't know that there is a whole other city, or rather two or three cities under modern Rome," he said at a recent conference. "Nowhere even in Italy is there such richness as there is in Rome. In Milan, archaeological remains are 10 to 12 feet deep; in Rome they can be more than 50 feet deep."

**The Present vs. the Past**

The battle between those seeking to turn Rome into a modern European capital and those fighting to preserve its priceless past has been going on for decades, and only recently was Cecchi named as arbiter. The job is not easy. Giovanni Ascarelli, the president of the company building the new Metro line, is frustrated.

The Metro C, scheduled to be completed by 2015, is well behind schedule, according to Ascarelli, "because of archaeology." He is "uncomfortable" knowing how far behind other European capitals Rome is. "I favor the needs of the present over those of the past," he says, "and Rome is not up to speed."

While a functioning Metro system is fundamental to the future of a modern city, the importance of the city's [archaeological wealth](http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=8761904) should not be underestimated.

"The Metro C is an absolute priority for this government," said Undersecretary for Cultural Heritage Francesco Giro at a conference to present some of the recent archeological finds, "and it must be completed within a human time frame." But he also pointed out what a great tourist (and hence financial) draw archaeology is for Rome.

In 2001, the tourists who came to Rome for its archaeology were 50 percent of the total. By 2008 it had grown to 60.5 percent, while tourism otherwise declined, Giro said.

The "archaeological metro," as it has been dubbed by the city-owned company that is building it, must become just that, says noted Italian art historian Andrea Carandini, the result of a "constructive conflict between past and present.”

**Reading Questions:**

**1. What are the main reasons that prevent the Metro line from being built quickly?**

**2. Why is it so difficult to actually build things underground in Rome?**

**3. Describe how many archaeological remains there are under Rome.**